

THE ROAD FROM POTTERVILLE

By Charles Caldwell Dobie

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GAYLE HOSKINS



ANDREW CAMERON'S farm was the last touch of civilization upon the road from Potterville. Beyond, the road climbed boldly through the timber, straggling into a mere trail that sheep-herders from the parched San Joaquin country traversed in quest of perpetual spring and green pastures.

The house, weather-beaten and decrepit, stood bleakly upon a ridge; before it, the little mountain clearing fell away abruptly to where a wind-blown apple orchard separated fields from meadow. Altogether it should have been a genial environment when the season allowed, but somehow it gave an impression of isolation, of ruggedness, of gaunt beauty, that robbed it of any sense of human homeliness. Its fields seemed to yield their harvests sullenly, the forest at its back frowned darkly upon it, the wind

stirred continually across the face of the meadow and up through the distorted apple-trees with insistent melancholy. It was as if old Andrew Cameron himself had set the stamp of his personality upon the very fields he had broken to the plough, and they had responded dutifully, sufficiently, but without prodigality or joy.

But however dull and sad the fields and forest, the road from Potterville was a thing of life. The very boldness with which it plunged in a curving line down the mountainside and into the purple westward glow stamped it with the vitality of the unexpected. Any one, anything, might emerge from the distant mists; and any one, anything, might be swallowed up in the whispering pine country beyond.

So, at least, it seemed to Margaret Cameron, who always found the road from Potterville full of promise and the

wayward charm of surprise. Not that anything wonderful had ever passed over its sun-baked surface in her day, although she had waited and hoped with an almost religious faith. But meagre as experiences were with Margaret Cameron, this road from Potterville was connected with every vital and stirring thing in her life. When had she ever heard singing except from the throats of rollicking horsemen swinging down the road from Potterville? When did the cries of children ever stir her, except at springtime as the squaws herded their broods along the highway and up into the forests and freedom? What had been the occasion of her first tears? Was it not when the last bend of the road had shut her brother from view as he galloped confidently into a far country? And the bitterest moment of her whole life had been when old Andrew Cameron, her father, had ridden away, without one tender word, along the same road not three weeks ago.

Since then, every evening, Margaret Cameron had scanned the road from Potterville for a sign of her father's homecoming. Day after day she had watched clouds of dust rise, evolve into horsemen, mule-teams, flocks of sheep, pass the house, and merge into dust again. But her waiting had no element of anxiety in it; she waited more from a sense of duty than from expectancy.

The sight, at last, of her father's horse, climbing past the first bend in the road surprised, but did not excite, her. She rose from her seat and leaned against the porch railing. It was her father's horse without a question, but the rider was not her father. Unmoved, she threw her sun-bonnet aside. The dust rose in a denser cloud, shutting the ambling horse and its strange rider completely from view.

She was sure, quite sure, that she would never see her father again. But she felt no sorrow, no regret, not even pity. Yet she put her hand to her eyes, trying to rouse a sense of filial anxiety, at least a feeling of dread.

On that last day, when her father had saddled his lean, stumbling horse and ridden away, he had not even kissed her, he had scarcely said good-by. And she had felt pity then, pity for his bent frame, for the added note of thinness to his stern

lips, for the senile cough that racked him with feeble fury. If he had kindled the dying fires in her heart with even a belated spark of affection, she could not have stood thus, dry-eyed and unafraid.

She recalled the last impression of her father, the grim silhouette of a stooped form against scarred cliffs, as he dipped down the winding road and disappeared. She had thought then: "He is dying; he will not live another month." And she had gone into the house shuddering, not at the fear of death, but at the realization that one could be so near to solving the eternal mystery and still have zest for life and its futilities. In the face of death he had cruelty and rancor enough left to set out upon the roughest of journeys to collect a debt almost on the day it fell due. Yes, she could still see the line of satisfaction hardening his lips, the cold glitter in his eyes, the nervous play of his claw-like fingers as he saddled his horse, all his faculties rising above physical infirmity at the spur of avarice. How bravely the October sun had mocked the warped figure crawling down the mountainside! Now, the early twilight, enveloping the home-coming horse and its strange rider, struck a gentler note, she thought, as she watched the black mass emerge from its dust-cloud again and crawl tortoise-wise up the hard white road.

The evening air rustling fretfully through the pines recalled her. The brief Californian twilight had spent itself and she discovered that it had grown quite dark.

She went into the house, lit a lantern, and started down the road. The crunching of hoofs came nearer. She stopped; at last her heart began to beat.

As she lifted up her lantern a swarm of moths fluttered gayly in its yellow light. Then, quite suddenly, the roadway was darkened by her father's horse. She lifted the lantern higher. It was just as she had guessed: the rider was *not* her father.

She stepped forward, and the light fell upon the stranger's face. At first, only a confused jumble of bloodshot eyes, a bristling stubble of beard, and a dust-stung brow flashed across her consciousness. But in an instant the truth rose to the surface and her mind leaped quickly



How bravely the October sun had mocked the warped figure crawling down the mountainside! — Page 626.

over the gap of ten weary years. She remembered her first tears and the youthful, buoyant figure that had swung down the Potterville road and out of her life on a spring day that had mocked her grief, a youthful, buoyant figure that now sagged wearily in her father's saddle.

The figure swayed sidewise and crumpled into the dust. The horse stopped. Margaret Cameron's lantern fell with a crash. Her brother had come home again.

II

AFTERWARD, sitting in her father's low-browed room, Margaret Cameron had time to think upon the wanderer's return. On a broad couch her brother slept with heavy-lidded exhaustion.

A slight stir from him brought her to his side. He did not wake, but she stood and watched him, searching deeply the spiritual scars that life had left upon his face.

How often had she pictured this home-coming! Always with a vague sense of pageantry which she had some difficulty in visualizing. She had expected a stirring note, a clattering of many horsemen, fluttering banners, the pomp and circumstance of a cavalcade, and, of necessity, her brother the central figure. She never had seen the road from Potterville peopled with quite the merry company that was to gallop home with her brother, and she knew that such companies no longer existed. But she treasured this vague vision in her heart until it blossomed into a symbol of what his return was to mean to her. And now reality came and mocked her again with the bedraggled figure of her brother, creeping up the hillside upon her father's lean, stumbling horse, silently and alone.

Beneath the sandy stubble of beard she followed the curving line of her brother's mouth, parted slightly as he lay with head thrown back. Yes, it was the same gentle, almost sensuous, mouth that had so often trembled before his sister's blunt reproofs, but which had been so ready to ripple with smiles. Even in his sleep this same smile hovered timidly. The blurred memory of her mother, or, more particularly, her mother's smile, came to her, a smile that had so often faded in the face of Andrew Cameron's thin-lipped displeasure. There had come a time when her mother's smile had grown rarer, and finally ceased to blossom; she had died soon after this melancholy circumstance. Why, Margaret Cameron found herself wondering. And, at once, the last picture of her father rose before her, a grim, self-sufficient, terrible figure, dipping down the winding road.

She turned from her brother and went toward the open window. A cool wind colored her cheeks and blew strands of her uncompromising hair loose. She leaned upon the sill and looked out.

Where had her brother met their father? Before or after Andrew Cameron had left Potterville? And the money? Had the old man collected the debt? She had been so surprised, so moved by her brother's home-coming that thoughts about the money had never occurred. A vague uneasiness stirred her. What had

become of the *money*? She could think of nothing else.

She heard her brother stirring again, and she went to him. He twisted toward the light, and then sat up suddenly. She dropped on her knees before him. He reached out and took her two hands in his.

"Margaret," he began, "are you ready to hear bad news? The fact is—you see——"

"Father is dead," she finished for him harshly.

He glanced at her with a look more of pain than surprise.

"Yes. Father is dead. He died just off the road, near the Pinto Trail, about thirty miles out of Potterville."

"Near the Pinto Trail?" she echoed indifferently. "How—then *you* were coming home?"

He let her hands fall. "No. I was not coming home. I'd been down the Merced Way herding cattle, and I was working back. I just stumbled onto him. He'd fallen from his horse, and he lived only a few hours. I suppose you'd call it Providence, if you've a leaning that way. But *I've* quit believing in most things."

"So have I," she flung back, clenching her fists.

A startled look swept him. "You, too?" he queried compassionately, and he put out his hands to her.

She gave him her hands again, coldly, mechanically. Only one question burned in her brain. *What had become of the money?*

"He was pretty far gone, Margaret," he droned on. "I found him at three o'clock and by sundown he was dead. At first I thought: 'I'll bury him here.' It was a peaceful enough spot, pines overhead and plenty of blue sky between. So I thought: 'I'll bury him here and then I'll go home and tell Margaret.'" He stopped for a moment and instinctively drew her closer. "But, then, when I'd thought it all out I made up my mind *that* wouldn't do. There's the law and all that to think of, even in a place as wild as the Pinto Trail country. So I strapped his body across the horse and started for Potterville. . . . I wish to God I hadn't."

She shuddered a bit as she rose. Her brother's eyes were searching her face



Drawn by Gayle Hoskins.

"You *are* a coward," she sneered.—Page 631.

hungrily, searching, she felt sure, for the tears that would not come.

"Was all this after he left Potterville?" she asked significantly.

"Yes, after he left Potterville."

"Did he tell you why he went there?"

"Yes. He went to collect the old debt that Mulford owed him. He had it on him when he died, the whole fifteen hundred."

She turned upon him eagerly. "Then the money is safe?"

He got up. "No. The money's spent—every nickel of it. That's what I came home to tell you, Margaret. I spent every nickel of it in Potterville—on cards, and women, and all the rest."

He sat down quite suddenly and naturally, while she stepped back into the shadows in an effort to regain herself. His jaws were snapped together with a viciousness that smothered the curve in his lips, and the mouth, losing its genial quality, seemed, even in intensity, hopelessly weak. There was a brutal heaviness, too, about his face that made Margaret Cameron recoil—as if the suddenness of his confession had forced every ugly thing in his nature to the surface.

"*Every nickel of it in Potterville—on cards, and women, and all the rest.*" Her brother's words struck her with all their simple irony. Her father's money, the money of old Andrew Cameron, squandered in the pursuit of pleasure! *Squandered in the pursuit of pleasure!* She found hysterical satisfaction in turning this idea over in her mind. It was so inconceivable, so remote, so fantastic.

She looked at her brother again, long and searchingly, almost with a desire to laugh. So this was the figure that for ten years had animated her day-dreams! She would not have cared so much if his unworthiness had been tricked out jauntily in a cloak of swagger and bravado—she had all the furtive, feminine admiration for impudent outlawry. But his inefficiency was so palpable—he had not even the courage of his acquired viciousness.

A feeling of rancor began to stir her. If old Andrew Cameron's money was to have been squandered in the pursuit of pleasure, who but she had the right to squander it?

She moved into the circle of light again and faced him.

"What possessed you to come and tell me?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Because I'm a coward."

"That's just what I thought," she sneered. "You're a regular prodigal, ain't you? Somehow, prodigals never do have courage to eat their husks alone, like men. They always come crawling back on their hands and knees, asking somebody's forgiveness. Bah!"

He shrank from the flame of her sarcasm, and his cowering movement roused her to fresh cruelty. She could feel the pent-up fury of the years struggling for a voice.

"I've always wanted to preach a sermon," she fumed; "once, just once, so I could give the *unprodigal* his innings. Everybody always cries over your *sort*. But did you ever hear of any one-shedding a tear for the *one who stays home*? Does any one *ever* waste a tear, or a fatted calf, on the *one who stays home*?" She pushed her face close to him. "Do you see the lines on this face? And my hands—look at them! Do you imagine I was ever repaid for staying with him? Do you imagine any one ever is repaid for such foolishness? Look at me. Why, the dirtiest Indian squaw who passes this cabin with a child at her breast has got more out of life than I have. I've been cheated out of every good thing—even the chance of being a prodigal. I've just showed you my wrinkled face and my shrunken hands. But if you could see my soul—I tell you I haven't enough soul left for even the devil to bother with!"

She stopped, waiting for his answer. He sat quite still, a stinging flush on his face. He said nothing. She had meant to call him a thief, to scream about the squandered money, but, curiously enough, she found that this loss meant nothing to her. All her anxiety concerning it had been an unconscious subterfuge with which she had kept at bay the fear of her brother's unworthiness.

She turned upon him with redoubled bitterness. "Why did you come back?" she demanded. "How *could* you come and tell me such a story! If I'd been in your shoes, I'd have killed myself first."

He shrank away. "I tried—I did try, Margaret," he gasped. "But I couldn't—somehow—"

She bent over toward him. "My God, but you *are* a coward," she sneered.

He did not flinch this time; he looked steadily at her.

"So are you," he replied dully. "Everybody is a coward—some way. What made you stay with him? Wasn't it because you were *afraid* to do the thing you wanted to do? And I didn't cheat you of any chance to be a prodigal. You're too much like father. Prodigals are born, not made!"

She turned from him and tapped the floor with her foot. She knew he was right. She had been a coward; she always would be a coward; slaves to duty could be nothing else. Conscience? Duty? Necessity?—these were all pretty names that people gave cowardice. . . . Yes, prodigals were born, not made. And, at once, the lean silhouette of her father dipping down the winding road rose before her.

She stole a furtive look at her brother. He was on his feet again, and the lamp-light struck him full in the face, emphasizing his uncanny gauntness.

"How long since you've had anything to eat?" she asked suddenly.

"I—I don't remember," he stammered.

"Sit down!" she commanded.

He did as he was bidden, and she brought food. . . . Standing back, she watched him eat, snapping at his victuals like a lean jackal. She had known hardship and privation and frugality, but never gnawing, physical hunger. She wondered dimly whether any affinity lay between the starvation of his body and the starvation of her soul. . . . Had her inner life shrunken to just such a parcel of skin-hung bone?

This ministering to her brother's physi-

cal necessity stirred in her an odd, primitive joy. Suddenly she sensed the deep, mystical truths that lay beneath the surface of simple, elemental things, and the significance of the prodigal's feast was clear to her. Pity began to well up in her, pity which swept away all scorn of his timidity, his cowardice, his inability to play up boldly to his faults.

Her mind wandered swiftly over the years of sacrifice and self-denial that had not ennobled. Perhaps these years had not been so hard in a physical way, but they were devoid of color, of beauty, of anything elemental, except elemental ugliness. And old Andrew Cameron? Yes, he was a just man, an honest man, a God-fearing man. But in this brief moment of ministering to a prodigal's need, Margaret Cameron knew that her father had travelled with the blind eyes of a just man and missed every good thing in life. *He* had never feasted, *he* had never sung, *he* had never wasted his substance, riotously or otherwise, *he* had never tasted the joys of forgiveness or being forgiven. And she remembered again the picture of him on that last day when he had saddled his lean, stumbling horse and ridden away—a grim, self-sufficient, terrible figure disappearing in the bend of the road.

How long she stood in battle for her soul's possession she did not know, but when she came from the struggle her brother's head had sunk in sensual torpor across the grease-smeared surface of his empty plate. The wind was still blowing through the open window, and a tossing curtain made fantastic shadows on the wall. It had grown very cold.

She tiptoed to the couch and picked up a blanket. Hesitating a moment, she held the covering high above the sleeping figure sprawled heavily across the table, then gently, very gently, she let it fall upon her brother's shoulders.



